

## DEATH AND BURIAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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### Introduction

The most significant questions of life inevitably pertain to life and death. These are questions unbound by cultural considerations, time restrictions or intellectual explorations. Without appearing hyperbolic, it may be safe to say that everyone, everywhere, will, at some point in their lives, raise these questions.

The Hebrew Bible (HB), also known to Christians as Old Testament (OT), does not stand disconnected from these questions. It tackles them head on and provides its own take on what life is, what death is and the significance of where the dead are.

The biblical concept of life originates in the creation story (this is true of human and non-human life). The first statement of the Bible asserts that 'God created' everything (Gen 1:1). This creation involved all life forms on planet earth (cf. Gen 1:1-31). The crowning work of this process was the creation of humanity in the form of the first human couple, Adam and Eve (Gen 1:28; 2:1ff.). Humanity was accorded the responsibility of rulership over this newly created world and Adam and Eve were placed in a category different from the other life forms on the planet (Wenham, 1987:33).

The distinctive feature of the biblical material is its insistence that human life resides in the very thought of God. In HB, God is portrayed as the originator of life, the very essence of its intentionality. To put this differently, human life is virtually an extension of God himself. Gen 1:26-27 portrays this intentionality by speaking of human existence as a two-part reality comprised of male and female halves which combine to form God's image (see discussion by Wenham, 1987:32-33).

So God created them in His own image;  
He created him in the image of God;  
He created them male and female (Gen 1:27; cf. 5:1; HCSB).

The parallelism between the second and third lines implies that the image of God consists of maleness and femaleness (Sailhamer, 1992:95). In the customised creations of Adam and Eve recorded in Gen 2, we glimpse other components of this divine intentionality. The following translations intersperses Hebrew and English words so as to highlight the wordplay embedded in the narrative (see Alter, 1996:8).

Then Yahweh formed the *'adam* (man) from the dust (*'apar*) of the *'adamah* (ground or soil) and breathed *nishmat khayyim* (living breath) into his nostrils and the *'adam* became a *nepesh khayyah* (living being) (Gen 2:7; personal).

This type of wordplay, called paranomasia or pun, is a favourite literary technique of writers in HB (Wenham, 1987:59). Adam's words, when he first sighted Eve, are equally revealing and display similar wordplay.

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she (lit. 'to this') shall be called *'ishah* (woman, wife) because from *'ish* (man, husband) she was taken (lit. 'was taken this') (Gen 2:23; personal).

The texts play on similar sounding words to connote the integration of creation but also draw attention to the uniqueness of humans (Sailhamer, 1992:98). He (the male) is the possessor of 'living

breath' which makes him a 'living being'. Without this 'living breath', he would be nothing more than 'adamah. She is as much a part of him as he is a part of the earth. All these realities are the creative handiwork of God. The possession of this living breath is the very essence of being human (cf. Josh 11:11; Isa 2:22; Wenham, 1987:60; Knibb, 1989:398).

The convergence of human existence in the very mind of God is augmented in two passages which appear much later in HB. Psalm 139 (attributed to David) delves into the unbreakable bond between divine and human which transcends time, space and any other reality. It distinctly places human life as recorded in God's book even before the reality of it unfolded (Ps 139:16). In the call to Jeremiah, God insisted that Jeremiah had been chosen prior to his conception (Jer 1:5). The evidence suggests that human life is irrevocably bound to God's intentionality (Kidner, 1987:25).

The phrase *nishmat khayyim* roughly parallels *ruakh khayyim* ('spirit of life'; cf. Gen 2:19; 6:17; 7:15,22; 9:9; Isa 42:5; Zech 21:1; cf. Knibb, 1989:398) and is applied to all living things (Wenham, 1987:60). However, there seems to be a stronger relationship between *nishmat/ruakh khayyim* and human life as evidenced in passages such as Gen 2:7; Job 27:3; 33:4; Isa 2:22; and Lam 4:20. Death then is the disappearance or removal of this living breath (Ps 104:29-30; cf. Knibb; 1989:398). The subsequent determination of death is relatively simple in Hebrew thought. If life is the connectedness between God and man, death is its integration. This biblical perspective of death is best encapsulated in the words of Qohelet via a broken chiasm: a-b-c-d-b-a-c-d.

returns . . .  
           the dust ('apar) . . .  
                   to the earth . . .  
                           as it was . . .  
           the spirit (*ruakh*) . . .  
 returns . . .  
           to God . . .  
                   who gave it.  
                           (Eccl 12:7; personal)

The parallel lines in the verse clearly indicate that death is the reversal of the created order expressed in Gen 2:7 (Fox, 1999:332).

. . . death is a cruel reversal of God's intentions. God formed man from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7), and gave him life, personality, intellect, capabilities, moral responsibility, and powers of creativity. Death reverses the process and turns us all into dust again, colourless and lifeless (Tidball, 1989: 183).

The reference to 'dust' and 'spirit', the connection of dust with earth (a synonym of ground) and the divine source of life all highlight this reversal of life called death. Essentially, death ends in nothing (Loader, 1986:132).

A more dominant question for people in biblical times was, 'Where do the dead go?' The answer to this question is encapsulated in the Hebrew word *sh'ol*. While the word itself has a rather extensive semantic range, its basic concept is akin to our modern English word 'grave'. Knibb argues that while *sh'ol* is the 'land of no return' it should also be differentiated from 'grave' as it connotes 'the realm of the dead' where the dead continue to live 'in a very weak and reduced state' (1989:407, 405).

The most telling evidence is recorded in Ezek 31 and 32. In these chapters, *sh'ol* (31:15,16,17; 32:21,27) parallels two other words, *qeber* (32:22,23,25,26) and *bor* (31:14,16; 32:18,23,24,25,29).

The word *qeber* is derived from the verbal root q-b-r which always implies burial or grave, whereas *bor* nearly always means a pit or hole in the ground. The parallel between the three words clearly points to *sh'ol* as grave rather than some place where the souls of the dead go to (Harris, 1980:892-893). Fox argues emphatically, 'Thus Qoh 12:7 does not imply continued existence of the sort that would overcome death and compensate for the miseries of life' and discounts 'the possibility of an enduring soul as unknowable and irrelevant' (1999:331, 332).

### **Burial in HB**

With the concept of life and death as background canvass, we discover that burial was extremely important in OT times. Abraham's purchase of the cave of Macpelah to bury Sarah in (Gen 23) illustrates this point. Further, the OT regularly records the burial of famous characters even when little else is known about them (cf. Jdgs 10:1-2; 10:3-5; 12:8-10; 12:11-12 and 12:13-15). By contrast, if a person did not receive a proper burial, this was considered very disgraceful (Isa 14:18-20; Jer 16:4; Trafton, 1996).

### **Patriarchal Period**

The patriarchal narratives of Genesis reveal that several generations were often buried in the same family tomb as was the case with Abraham's family. Sarah (Gen 23:19), Abraham (Gen 25:9), Isaac, Rebekah and Leah (Gen 49:31) and Jacob (Gen 50:13) were all buried in the cave of Macpelah (Motyer, 1980:211).

Sometimes circumstances prevented a family member from being buried in the family tomb as was the case with Deborah (Gen 35:8) and Rachel (Gen 35:19-20). In both instances, the tombs were marked by a tree and a pillar or *stèle* respectively (Thompson, 1986:92). Coffins were not part of the norm either and the reference to a coffin for Joseph (Gen 50:2-3,26) is an exceptional case (Motyer, 1980:211; Thompson, 1986:93).

### **Burial Legislation**

The Torah provided certain instructions with regards to death and burial which would suggest the start of Israelite tradition. The Torah set out prompt burial as the norm for Israel (Deut 21:22-23) unless a Sabbath or feast day was involved (Gower, 1987:72). Moreover, contact with the dead rendered a person ceremonially unclean and therefore a period of ritual cleansing was required immediately after the burial. The cultural practices of mourning, lamenting and tearing of clothes were forbidden for the high priest (Lev 21:1-11) and those under the Nazirite vow (Num 6:7). Other cultural customs such as body lacerations, shaving or balding were prohibited for every Israelite (Lev 19:27-28; 21:5; Deut 14:1). Other Canaanite practices such as 'eating of tithe in mourning or offering them to the dead' (Deut 26:14) were also prohibited (Motyer, 1980:211).

The Torah allowed for longer periods of mourning for certain situations. The death of a national leader like Moses (Deut 34:5-8) and Aaron (Num 20:28-29) could occasion a 30 day mourning. The same length of mourning was also prescribed for women who were captured during war and forced to marry their captors. The mourning apparently was for their parents who may now be lost to them (Motyer, 1980:211).

### **Excursus on Cremation**

Timothy George points out are several examples of cremation in the OT, Achan (Josh 7:25-26), Saul (1 Sam 31:12) and the King of Edom (Amos 2:1). However, in several of them God's judgment (cf.

Amos 2:1; 6:10) and curse are involved (Josh 7:25-26). Also, when Paul offered his body to be burned (1 Cor. 13:3), he was speaking about martyrdom rather than cremation (George, 2002:1). A brief glance at certain cremation stories may enable us to clarify the stories.

In 1 Sam 31:12-13, the people of Jabesh-gilead went to Beth-shan (about 16 kms distance) to retrieve the mutilated remains of King Saul and his son. Then they burnt the bodies and buried the bones. The reason for burning the bodies is not spelt out but in this episode it may have been done to keep the bodies from greater dishonour or because the corpses 'had already begun to rot' (Alter, 1999:191).

2 Chron 16:14 records Asa's funeral which apparently included burial and burning. It may be argued that the fire here refers to cremation. There are three clauses in this verse: 'they buried him . . .', 'they laid him out in a coffin . . .' and 'they made a great fire . . .' The verse seems to suggest cremation as the third act in the burial. However, the Hebrew reads 'they made a great fire to/for him', that is in his honour. This is the reading of several translations (HCSB, NLT, NIV, CEV, etc.). In fact, the Septuagint (LXX) translated the last clause as 'they made a great funeral for him'. In the case of King Jehoram (2 Chron 21:19), the text specifically states that no great fire was 'made to/for him'. The same syntax is used here as in the Asa story; Jehoram was not honoured by his people. The reference to such ceremonial fires also appears in relation to King Zedekiah (Jer 34:4-5). In these stories, the fire does not indicate cremation but some sort of ceremony for the deceased king (Payne, 1994:650).

While the biblical data on cremation is inconclusive at best, there are certain reasons for arguing against cremation. Most of the biblical stories involve burial rather than cremation, whereas most of the cremation cases involve some divine judgement (see above). There are also practical considerations against cremation. The biblical narratives often involve a burial marker but this would be impossible if the body is not buried. There is also the question of who would keep the ash urn usually given to the family after a cremation.

At the same time, there are arguments in favour of cremation. The biblical resurrection concept does not require burial since God will raise the dead regardless of burial type. Moreover, even buried bodies will eventually decompose and become dust and cremation simply speeds up the process. From a practical point of view, cremation is normally cheaper, allows for flexibility in organising memorial services, is preferred in certain instances (when land is unavailable) and if it involves a pre-death wish of the person (cf. Fairchild, 2014:2).

Perhaps, in the absence of definite biblical teaching, the issue is as much a matter of choice. However, questions about a marker to remember the deceased and place for keeping the urn should be carefully thought through. The suggestion by Fairchild is a balanced way to approach the subject.

How you want to be laid to rest is a personal decision. It is important to discuss your wishes with your family, and also know the preferences of your family members. This will make funeral preparations a little easier for everyone involved. (Fairchild, 2014:2)

## **Burial Steps**

As Thompson put it, 'Death, in Bible times, was never hushed up. When a person dies there was an open and public demonstration of grief . . .' (1986:92). This sentiment gave birth to the first major step of burial, lamentation.

### **Wail and Lamentation**

The 'wail was an announcement to the neighbourhood that a death has taken place' (Gower, 1987:71). Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the wail and lamentation which accompany death is seen in the narrative about the death of the firstborn of Egypt. As Gower describes it, 'that wail could be heard through the whole country' (1987:71). Mic 1:8-9 speak of the prophet's wail and lamentation over the impending doom (death) of the nation and compares wailing to the sounds of jackals and owls (Gower, 1987:71).

Because of this I will lament and wail;  
I will walk barefoot and naked.  
I will howl like the jackals and mourn like ostriches.  
For her wound is incurable and has reached even Judah;  
It has approached the gate of my people, as far as Jerusalem.

Similarly, David mourned over the death of his son Absalom (2 Sam 18:33-19:4) and Abner (2 Sam 3:31-34).

The mourning period usually lasted for seven days (Motyer, 1980:211; Thompson, 1986:92). This was certainly the case with the burial of King Saul and his sons (1 Sam 31:13). However, the days of mourning could be longer than a week. In the national mourning for Moses, the period lasted for 30 days (Deut 34:8). Gen 50:1-5 states that the Egyptians mourned the death of Jacob for 70 days but clarifies this by explaining that the embalming process took longer than expected. It should also be noted that the death and burial of some leading characters, for instance, Elisha (2 Kgs 13:20-21), involved minimal fanfare. The account of Abraham mourning over Sarah states no time period (Gen 23:2).

The activities associated with this funeral lamentation involved mourning, crying, beating one's chest, tearing clothes (2 Sam 3:31), wearing sackcloth and covering with ash (Thompson, 1986:92). Laments were even composed and sung at such times by professional mourners or hired wailers (Jer 9:17-18; Amos 5:16) making the funeral procession a rather noisy affair (Thompson, 1986:92-93). Everyone participated in the mourning wails as this provided a legitimate outlet for grief and may have been viewed as a duty for the relatives of the dead person (Thompson, 1986:93).

The funeral for Abner (2 Sam 3:31-34) underscores the most essential elements of mourning: (1) mourning was required (v31); (2) it involved tearing of clothes (v31); (3) wearing of sackcloth was deemed appropriate (v31); (4) a procession was held (v31); (5) wailing was described (vv2,34); and (5) a lament was composed and sung (vv33-34).

#### Burial Proper

Israelites valued a proper burial (Eccl 6:3) and considered not being buried as divine judgement (Deut 28:26; 2 Kgs 9:10; Jer 7:33; Horn, 1979). Quick burials were held, often within 24 hours (Horn, 1979:167), and this was partially driven by the hot climate which led to rapid decomposition (Gower, 1987:72). The body was normally washed, wrapped in cloth and carried on a bier or wooden stretcher to the burial site (Gower, 1987:72; Horn, 1979:167). Burial sites could be natural caves or artificially-made ones (Gen 49:29-32; Jdgs 8:32). Inside the cave, niches or shelves were carved out where the corpse would be placed. Decomposed bones were then placed in ossuaries, stone jars or bone boxes, to allow reuse of the tomb. After the burial, the tomb was sealed with stone. Alternatively, the body was surrounded by boulders in a rough oblong shape about 50 cms in diameter. The body was then covered by earth (Gower, 1987:72-73). Because of the hardness of the ground, burial was actually not common in Israel and the burial sites described above were normally kept outside the village except for royalty (1 Kgs 2:10; Gower, 1987:73). The Egyptian burial rite of

embalming was not practised but there is some evidence of embalming as in the Joseph story (Gen 50:2, 26).

### Funeral Meal

In the lengthy job description God gave to Jeremiah, several things are listed as events Jeremiah is allowed or not allowed to participate in. He was prohibited from entering any 'house where a mourning feast is taking place' (Jer 16:5; HCSB). Literally, the verse reads 'a house of mourning (*marzeakh*)'. However, the parallel with Amos 6:7, 'mourning (*marzeakh*) of revelry' and the mention of food in verse 7, implies that this is a meal or feast (Brown, 1979:931). This action of the prophet served to highlight the fact that Judah's demise would be similar to a funeral but without the funeral meal (Jer 16:7).

### Conclusion

The burial customs recorded in HB reflect both the theological views of the Scriptures on life and death and the cultural milieu of Israel's world. The conceptualisation of life and death are tied in closely to the teachings of Torah and prophets. Life is created by God and God's intentionality differentiates man from other living things. The 'living breath' is the symbol which encapsulates this humanness that we all share.

The presence of sin precipitates the reversal of life and this is referred to as death. In HB, death is the dissolution of the creation intentionality of God. If life is the combination of material (the dust of the ground) and divine (the living breath) then death is the reversal of this. A dead person is one whose material components return to their source and whose breath of life also returns to its source, that is God. While the dead are depicted as going to *sh'ol*, this does not connote a place where some version of life continues to exist. Rather, *sh'ol* is the grave, the pit in the ground where the dead are buried.

Further, it has been observed that burial customs reflect the cultural norms of Israel's neighbours but also exhibit clear distinctions. Like, many of the tribes around them, the patriarchs and Israel buried their dead in tombs or marked graves. In some instances, the cultural practices of other nations are copied as in the embalming of Joseph's body or the practice of wailing. At the same time, certain Canaanite rituals such as body lacerations were expressly forbidden by God. To use terminology from today's world, genuine contextualisation occurred in HB. On the one hand, certain cultural practices within Israel's milieu were adhered to, while, on the other hand, other cultural practices were rejected.

It appears that following this double-edged biblical principle to cultural norms is the way forward in this discussion concerning life, death and burial practices. Customs which do not conflict with any specific biblical teaching should be embraced, while those that may contradict Scripture or foster a degree of ambivalence should be very carefully thought through. This is not to say that this or that practice should be rejected outright. Before we reject any cultural practice, we ought to consider the complete ramifications of acceptance or rejection. A double-edged contextualisation is perhaps the safest way forward.

I contend that double-edged contextualisation involves accommodation, adjustment and restructuring in both directions. Another way of putting this is that genuine contextualisation results in gospel methodology transforming culture while also inculturating itself so as to be considered less foreign. The HB underscores this idea rather profoundly and implies that this is the way God's church should live today. This is especially significant when applied to the subject at hand.

Funerals are as significant today as they were in biblical times. They also afford the church with great opportunities for ministry and pastoral care. Through careful application of the double-edged contextualisation practised in HB, we may benefit in ways we have not yet considered possible. At the very least we ought to view funeral practises as missional opportunities, not merely to minister to the bereaved but also to grow God's kingdom. Exerting the proper effort to accomplish these goals may uncover quantum leap possibilities for the Church.

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